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Soviet Intentions and Options in Southwest Asia: Near-Term Prospects

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SOVIET INTENTIONS AND OPTIONS IN SOUTHWEST ASIA: NEAR-TERM PROSPECTS

Information as of 7 March 1980 was used in the preparation of this paper

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Moscow's willingness to pay what it anticipated would be an appreciable political and economic price for its intervention in Afghanistan stemmed from the deteriorating situation in that country and overall Soviet strategic interests in the region.

Regardless of the precise mix of motivations and interests underlying Moscow's decision to intervene, the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan has placed the USSR in a position to exploit the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of Afghanistan's immediate neighbors.

The Soviets will continue for tactical reasons to suggest a certain receptivity to proposals for troop withdrawals. In the next two to three months, however, they will probably continue their buildup to a total force of at least eight division equivalents. Following this spring's counterinsurgency offensive, they are likely to conclude that even more forces are needed. Regardless of their success against the insurgents, the Soviets intend to maintain a significant military presence in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future to reinforce their broader regional influence.

Moscow sees its current best option in Iran as one of continuing its attempt to curry favor with the Khomeini regime. The Soviets are also maintaining relations with the Iranian left and with Iran's ethnic minorities, but they are proceeding cautiously lest they further arouse the anti-Soviet suspicions of Khomeini and his entourage.

Moscow would clearly prefer to achieve its broader aims in Iran without using military force. However, it could respond to large-scale Afghan rebel activity in Iran with hot-pursuit forays and cross-border raids and might consider more massive intervention in response to a threat of Western intervention, countrywide disintegration, or civil war.

A key element in any Soviet decision to intervene in Iran would be Moscow's perception of the likely US military response—a response Moscow recognizes would be influenced by Western economic and security interests that are far greater than those that were at stake in Afghanistan.

The Soviet approach to Pakistan will likely remain one of keeping Pakistan sufficiently uneasy to discourage too much support for the Afghan rebels and too close an alignment with the United States or

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China, while keeping alive the option of accommodation to Moscow. In view of Pakistan's rejection of US aid offers, the Soviets now are probably more confident that pressure tactics will continue to work against Islamabad.

Moscow looks upon India as an asset in the effort to limit damage from its Afghan invasion and realizes it must now be more forthcoming to maintain that asset. If the survivability of Pakistan as a buffer state seemed threatened, however, the interests of Moscow and New Delhi would diverge.

DISCUSSION

This memorandum focuses on Soviet intentions in Southwest Asia as they bear on likely Soviet behavior during the next six to 12 months.

The Decision To Intervene

The Soviet decision to intervene in Afghanistan was made with careful consideration of the expected consequences and potential problems. Although the Soviet leaders certainly dismissed the possibility of direct US military opposition, they probably did anticipate such adverse international consequences as a setback to US-Soviet relations, an accelerated buildup of US defenses, increased Sino-American security cooperation, and negative reactions in the Muslim world.

As for the continuation of the atmosphere of detente with the United States, Moscow already saw it as being in jeopardy. Moreover, the Soviets believed the adverse consequences of intervention would be reduced because of the US preoccupation with Iran and the internal disarray in Iran and Pakistan. Although the Soviets may have underestimated the costs, we believe that they would have intervened even if they had foreseen what has actually transpired.

Moscow's willingness to pay what it anticipated would be an appreciable political and economic price for its intervention in Afghanistan stemmed from the deteriorating situation within that country and from overall Soviet strategic interests in the region. Moscow saw that Afghan political and military institutions that it had helped to mold were on the verge of collapse and believed that this would precipitate a distinct decline in Soviet influence over a country that was a longstanding Soviet client, perhaps transforming it into another militantly Islamic state.

Apart from more immediate concerns, the Soviets were also motivated by geopolitical considerations and strategic calculations. On the one hand, they feared that a humiliating reversal in Afghanistan would be a blow to their prestige, slow the momentum of their advance in the Third World, and damage their credibility with other client regimes. On the other hand, they hoped that consolidation of firm political and military control over Afghanistan would facilitate further expansion of their influence into other parts of Southwest Asia and the Middle East.

Over the longer term, the Soviets hope through their presence in Afghanistan to reduce Western and Chinese influence and promote accommodating behavior throughout the region. This could facilitate their ongoing efforts to gain increased access to air and naval facilities on the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. The Soviets will attempt to manipulate and exploit heightened perceptions of their ability to threaten vital oil resources. They will encourage beliefs that Soviet cooperation is required to ensure stability in oil supplies and that it must be fostered by providing the USSR with improved access to the oil resources of the region.

Afghanistan

The Soviets did not invade Afghanistan with any expectation that they would be able quickly to establish effective control over the entire country. To date they have concentrated on consolidating their control in Kabul and some other key cities and over major lines of communication. However, the Afghan insurgents have continued the fighting even in areas where Soviet forces have been active. The Afghan Army has continued to disintegrate in areas of major resistance, and the Soviets cannot count on the loyalty of the few effective units that exist.

The most serious Soviet problem over the near term is the failure of the Soviet-installed government of Babrak Karmal to control the cities. The overwhelming majority of the populace views the government as a Soviet puppet, and nationalist and Islamic fervor is fueling broad popular opposition to the Soviet presence.

Even before the urban disturbances in late February, the Soviets were committing additional forces. Several weeks earlier, the Soviets introduced one division that they had been holding in reserve and began forming several specially configured heliborne units for counterinsurgency operations. The Soviets, moreover, are continuing to improve their logistic capabilities along the border for moving men and supplies into Afghanistan. Soviet units within Afghanistan, some of which are being regrouped into highly flexible brigades, have recently begun more aggressive counterinsurgency operations.

We believe that the Soviets probably plan to build up to a total force of at least eight division equivalents—120,000 or more men—in the next two to three months. A force of this size would permit the Soviets to mount a more extensive counterinsurgency campaign this spring while maintaining the security of key urban areas and major lines of communication. However, such a force would not enable the Soviets to conduct a full-fledged countrywide counterinsurgency effort without the support of a more effective Afghan Army.

Whether the Soviets decide to augment their forces further will depend largely on the outcome of their efforts to reconstitute an effective Afghan Army and on the resiliency of the insurgents following the emergent Soviet offensive. On balance, we believe that the Soviets are likely to conclude that even more forces are needed.

Although the Soviets have suggested that cessation of "external interference" might lead them to begin a troop withdrawal, they are unlikely to act on such suggestions in the short run, since neither the Babrak government nor any Soviet-imposed successor could survive without major Soviet military support. At this stage, Soviet talk about withdrawal appears to be a tactic designed to dampen international pressure and particularly to drive wedges between the United States and its allies.

Over the longer run, successful curtailment of the insurgency and partial stabilization of the Afghan political situation might enable the Soviets to withdraw some of their forces, but they would wish to maintain sufficient forces to ensure their control over the country. Moreover, even under the most favorable circumstances there, we believe they intend to maintain a significant military presence. Moscow will seek to use this presence to reinforce the USSR's broader regional influence and possibly to exploit the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of Afghanistan's immediate neighbors.

Iran

Since the collapse of the Shah's regime in early 1979, Soviet policy toward Iran has been aimed at encouraging anti-Western attitudes there, improving economic and political relations with the new regime, and creating a favorable climate for an eventual pro-Soviet government. The intervention in Afghanistan has greatly complicated these conciliatory efforts, and will continue to do so the longer the Soviets stay in Afghanistan and the more involved they become in fighting the insurgency there.

Iranian officials have publicly proclaimed support for their "Muslim brethren" in Afghanistan, and [redacted] indicates that limited material assistance has already been provided. Since the invasion, Pakistan and Iran have moved closer together, spurred by common perceptions of a Soviet threat. In the coming months, Tehran will probably provide the Afghan rebels with media access for propaganda purposes and support for liberation offices and refugee camps in Iran. It will probably tolerate cross-border arms smuggling and rebel movements. The Iranian Government is unlikely, however, to provide large-scale support to the Afghan resistance, at least until it sees how much support other Islamic nations provide.

While the Soviets have been large indirect beneficiaries of the US loss of influence in Iran, their own bilateral relations with Tehran have not prospered under the erratic Khomeini regime. Even before the invasion of Afghanistan, Moscow failed to establish a satisfactory working relationship with Tehran.

The Soviets have two basic strategies for enhancing their influence over their strategic southern neighbor:

- The first—and, we believe, the preferred—Soviet strategy has been to seek crucial leverage over a unitary Iranian state in which the Tudeh Communist Party could eventually become a significant factor. At the same time, the Soviets, since the fall of the Shah, have reportedly increased their covert activities among Iran's ethnic minority groups and their efforts to strengthen the Tudeh Communist Party. They have proceeded cautiously, however, lest they further arouse the anti-Soviet suspicions of Khomeini and his entourage. Moscow has taken care not to derail what will remain its primary focus of attention so long as Khomeini retains dominant power—namely, the improvement of state-to-state relations with an Iranian regime whose foreign policy has a marked anti-Western orientation.
- Failing in an effort to achieve primary influence with a centralized Iranian state, the Soviets might alternatively seek to encourage centrifugal ethnic forces in the country, break down central authority, and exploit the ensuing disruption.

Moscow clearly would prefer to achieve its broader aims in Iran without using military force. As long as

Iranian support for the Afghan rebels remains at a fairly low level, the Soviets are unlikely to retaliate militarily. However, conspicuous large-scale Afghan rebel activity in Iran could lead to hot-pursuit forays and cross-border raids. Furthermore, the threat of Western intervention, Khomeini's death and the loss of central control over the ethnic areas, or widespread chaos might tempt the Soviets to claim a threat to their security and intervene. In so doing, they might use the 1921 Soviet-Iranian treaty as the legal justification, or the claim that they were asked in by the Tudeh. The USSR has refused to accept the Iranian abrogation of the 1921 treaty provisions that allow for direct Soviet intervention in Iran if the internal situation in that country or foreign intrigue threatens the security of the Soviet Union.

Since late 1978, the Soviets have increased intelligence surveillance of the border with Iran and, more recently, have raised their state of military preparedness. They have no doubt prepared contingency plans for armed intervention. [redacted]

A key element in any decision to intervene in Iran, however, would be Moscow's perception of a likely US response. Moscow no doubt recognizes that Western economic and security interests in Iran are considerably higher than in Afghanistan and that the likelihood of a strong military US response is thus also far greater.

Pakistan

Pakistan will almost certainly remain under Soviet pressure to cease all support for Afghan insurgents. Pakistan's aid to rebel forces so far has been limited. Even so, Afghan Government forces in the past year have occasionally shelled refugee concentrations across the border. The Soviets have confined themselves to diplomatic and propaganda threats against Islamabad and have been cautious in their own military operations near the Pakistani-Afghan border. They are probably planning, however, for the contingency of hot-pursuit raids across the Pakistan border and in any event will attempt to have the border sealed.

Islamabad recognizes its vulnerability to Soviet pressure. It has publicly stated it will resist any attacks from Afghanistan, but there has been no significant reinforcement of Pakistani armed forces near the Afghan border. While Pakistan may eventually attempt to restrict the use of its territory as a sanctuary by Afghan rebels, the government will find it politically difficult to move conspicuously in this direction because of President Zia's carefully nurtured Islamic image and because of the numerous kinship and ethnic ties between tribesmen on both sides of the border.

The issue will become increasingly troublesome if intensified Soviet military operations force the Afghan rebels to rely more heavily on sanctuaries in Pakistan. For Islamabad the issue will be complicated also by the fact that China and some Arab countries will continue to pressure Pakistan to increase its aid to the insurgents, although even the Chinese reportedly do not want to get too deeply involved in activities that would merely be provocative toward the USSR or India.

Islamabad views the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan as a long-term military threat that is far more serious than the immediate border security problem raised by Soviet counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan. Pakistan is concerned that the Soviets may intensify their covert contacts with Baluchi and other tribal separatists in Pakistan or that they may in other ways attempt to take subversive advantage of the country's political instability. Even with the new Soviet threat, however, Pakistan still fears India as its primary enemy, particularly since the return to power of Indira Gandhi. Pakistan's feeling of vulnerability has given Moscow important additional political leverage.

In view of Pakistan's rejection of US aid offers, the Soviets now are probably more confident that pressure tactics will continue to work against Islamabad. Counterinsurgent activities have brought Soviet forces close to the Pakistani border, but, so long as Islamabad appears to be keeping the United States at arm's length, the Soviets are unlikely to exert heavy military pressure.

Moscow's objectives in Pakistan, particularly in the short term, are subordinated to Soviet aims relating to Afghanistan and India. The Soviets have recognized the concern in India created by the Afghan invasion; they prefer not to act so precipitiously in Pakistan as to compound that alarm.

On balance, the Soviet approach likely will remain one of keeping Pakistan sufficiently uneasy to discourage too much support for the Afghan rebels and too close an alignment with the United States or China, while keeping alive in Islamabad the option of accommodation to Moscow as the price for Soviet restraint.

India

Afghan developments have underscored Moscow's basic interest in preserving and enhancing its close ties to India, which, because of its size, population, geographic position, and importance in global politics, is its major Asian counterweight to China. Moscow looks upon India as an asset in the effort to limit damage from its Afghan invasion, and realizes it now must be more forthcoming—in military and economic assistance, for example—to maintain that asset.

India has been alarmed at the implications of this Soviet aggression so close to home, including the danger that Pakistan might cease to be a viable buffer. The Gandhi government has nominally accepted the position that Soviet objectives in Afghanistan are at this point limited to securing control in a weak client border state, but, beyond that, Soviet diplomatic assurances have so far not been sufficient to ease Indian concerns. Nevertheless, the Gandhi government sees no realistic alternative to good relations with the USSR.

Accepting Moscow's refusal to commit itself to a withdrawal from Afghanistan, New Delhi now sees overall stability in South Asia threatened principally by US and Chinese efforts to strengthen Pakistan militarily. The Gandhi government may try to counter this with renewed efforts to ease tensions with Pakistan. Moscow would not object to this, so long as it took place in a context consistent with Soviet efforts—through threats and/or inducements—to limit Pakistan's identification with China and the United States and its assistance to the Afghan insurgency.

If fighting should erupt on the Afghan-Pakistani border, India would almost certainly press for a peaceful resolution involving Pakistani restraint in aid to Afghan dissidents. Such a position would not run counter to Moscow's presumed interest in limiting military incidents with Pakistan.

Given the increased polarization that Afghanistan has brought about, Moscow is probably relatively sanguine that it can forestall the movement begun by Indira Gandhi during her first administration (and continued by the Janata government) toward greater diplomatic flexibility and easing of tension with China. As it was, the movement toward rapprochement with China was stalled last year by China's invasion of Vietnam.

If major fighting erupted between Soviet and Pakistani forces and particularly if the survivability of Pakistan as a buffer seemed threatened, the Indian response would be less predictable. It might seek to pressure the USSR by improving relations with the United States and resuming the process of rapprochement with China. India's aim would be to avoid the dismemberment of Pakistan and to enable it to survive as a buffer state.